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Permission to Play: Obstacles and Open Spaces in Music-Making

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Abstract

*When the word play is used to describe music-making, the implication is that play is a sophisticated phenomenon involving an interaction of so many elements that it is both engrossing and beyond calculation. This definition of play hails from the field of philosophy and is the focus of this article. It is chiefly inspired by Hans George Gadamer's magnum opus *Truth and Method*, in which he argues that art is able to communicate shared truths across both time and place via the phenomenon of play. Section I: Play is an illumination of Gadamer's concept of play as it relates specifically to the performance of music. Quotations from renowned performers and snippets of poetry are woven throughout the essay. Section II: Meaning explores how musical play creates significant experiences via the phenomenon of transformation. The paradigm put forth asserts that meaning is created and shared by composer, performer, and audience.*

Play

“Don’t say practice; say play” advised Professor Norman during my first lesson at UCLA. At first, I misinterpreted his request as an excuse to avoid exasperating types of practice. However, I slowly came to realize that in emphasizing play over practice, my teacher was not demanding less of me; he was actually demanding more.

Consequently, I was compelled to ask the question, “What is play?” The definition began to take shape during a simple observation. People love to watch musicians play. The word is used in common parlance, as in the following: “I saw Jimi Hendrix play at Woodstock.” In this context, the word points to an experience that, at its best, is a revelation of intimate ideas and emotions, a real-time expression of humanity’s shared virtue and vulnerability. When great musicians play, they enliven everyone. Hours of preparation precede effective performances. At the time of performance, when technique and the skills developed through demanding practice join with an attentive spontaneity, play arises. It follows that play, when used in reference to music-making, connotes more than frivolous fun. Musicians play in a sophisticated sense, as it is employed in the following excerpt from Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*: “The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag.”¹

The implication is that play involves an interaction of so many elements that it is both engrossing and beyond calculation. When used in this way, play becomes worth considering. When play is viewed as frivolous, practice and academic study are seen as more useful activities. As a result, numerous musicians have missed an opportunity to discover the ways in which play is vital to music-making.

Perhaps the reason play is often overlooked by musicians and institutions is

because its results are not as easily quantifiable as the results of practice. It could also be that play is so fundamental to what musicians and audiences do that it is often taken for granted. The danger in placing the straightforward value of practice above the abstract value of play is suggested by the following allegory first articulated by the Taoist sage, Chaung Tzu.

If you have no appreciation for what has no use
 You cannot begin to talk about what can be used.
 The earth, for example, is broad and vast
 But of all this expanse a man uses only a few inches
 Upon which he happens to be standing.
 Now suppose you suddenly take away
 All that he is not actually using
 So that, all around his feet a gulf
 Yawns, and he stands in the Void,
 With nowhere solid except right under each foot:
 How long will he be able to use what he is using?²

Just as the entirety of the earth is essential in Chuang Tzu's paradigm, play is essential to music-making. While practice is crucial, it is ultimately secondary to the importance of play in music-making. Play is at the root of music's ability to communicate profound ideas, feelings, and experiences. Without it, music is reduced to sounds that are incapable of transmitting meaning from one person to another. Humanity would have no need to perpetuate a meaningless institution and there would be no need for practice. Therefore, an exploration of play will enhance personal practice regimens, not detract from them.

The concept of play has historically enchanted artists, philosophers, psychologists, and anthropologists. Diverse definitions of play have emerged across disciplines, making it is easy to mistake one for another. Throughout the academic world, the confusion over the word play has escalated to the point that Harvard professor Brian Sutton-Smith, in his recent publication *The Ambiguity of Play*, saw a need to distinguish between the many

definitions.³

The type of play discussed in the present article hails from the field of philosophy. It is chiefly inspired by Hans George Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, in which he makes the case that art is able to communicate shared truths across both time and place via the phenomenon of play.⁴ Gadamer's broad definition of play is made to apply to all branches of art. The first section of this article is an illumination of Gadamer's concept of play as it relates specifically to the performance of music. I have supplemented Gadamer's philosophy by referencing the experiences of significant artists. I encourage readers to experiment with these ideas on their own.

Play is Not Goal Oriented

The first defining element of play is that it is not goal oriented. The distinction between practice and play hinges on this point. Practice is goal oriented. For example, a practice session might involve increasing the tempo of a passage or refining a timbral transition. Practice goals do not always have to be overtly stated; they can also be implicit. For some musicians, repetition is a pillar of practice. Often, it is founded on the belief that the more an idea is played, the more accurate it will become.

The type of goal achievement sought in practice is not at the heart of a meaningful performance. If performances were mainly concerned with goal completion, then an effective performance would be realized at the moment the piece ends and would follow with a corresponding evaluation of how many mistakes were made in the performance. If this were the case, then audiences would endure hours of performance for a single moment of judgment.

Significant performances are determined by many moments of diverse expressions to which qualitative judgments are difficult to assign. Consider the “play of shine and shade on the trees” in the aforementioned poetic excerpt. The movement of trees and clouds and the transitions of light and shadow all have no goals. The poet extols the actions of nature, regardless of how they started or ended. The poet is transfixed by what Gadamer would describe as “to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end...rather it renews itself in constant repetition.”⁵

As is suggested by the poetry above, the actions of nature operate without ambition. All of nature plays, including humans. Gadamer states this fact accordingly:

The fact that the mode of being of play is so close to the mobile form of nature permits us to draw an important methodological conclusion. It is obviously not correct to say that animals **too** play, nor is it correct to say that, metaphorically speaking, water and light play **as well**. Rather, on the contrary, we can say that **man too plays**⁶. His playing too is a natural process.⁷

The To-and-Fro Dynamic of Play

The following haiku implies that the creation of art is essentially more like the to-and-fro movement of nature than the goal oriented movement of the culture of man.

A baby sparrow...
hopping with curiosity
to watch my brushwork⁸
-Shoha

Here the sparrow is an ambassador of nature. Since it cannot even comprehend the word or image that will be the outcome of the painting, it certainly is not watching to see the end result. What then makes the bird curious? Shoha believes that the brush stroke is what holds the bird’s attention: the swishing sound of the brush hairs on the paper or the fluid motion of the artist’s hand that resemble a bird in flight. Regardless of what specifically

fascinates the bird, it is not the completed, painted image; it is more likely the to-and-fro motion inherent in the event of creation.

It is worth asking what captures the attention of audiences. It is equally important to ask what it is about playing an instrument that captures the attention of musicians. Musicians spend countless hours interacting with their instruments. Is all of that time spent on goal attainment or is some of it spent playing with the to-and-fro movement that renews itself? Charles Rosen advises pianists,

there has to be a genuine love simply of the mechanics and difficulties of playing, a physical need for the contact with the keyboard, a love and a need which may be connected with a love of music but are not by any means totally coincident with it.⁹

In essence, Rosen believes that musicians are drawn to music-making largely because they delight in the difficulties of the to-and-fro dynamic of play.

In the broadest sense, the to-and-fro dynamic in music-making occurs when a musician creates a sound that is altered by the environment. Sensitive musicians are aware of the ways in which their music interacts with elements of the environment that are outside of their direct control. The cycle continues when the musician responds to the altered sound with another musical gesture. Musical performances are full of countless acoustical manifestations leaving and returning to the musician.

Five significant to-and-fro relationships are worth adumbrating: musician and space, musician and instrument, musician and other musicians, musician and self, and musician and pulse. These five pairs influence music-making, regardless of a musician's level of expertise.

When examining the relationship between musician and space, one finds that play happens when we pay attention to how sounds interact with the acoustics of the performance environment. Think of the child who stumbles upon an echoing cave, yells

“Hello!” and eagerly awaits the responding rush of echoes. The difference between the child’s play and the musician’s play is that musicians, usually through practice and experience, become masters of navigating this acoustical relationship. The impact of the space on a performance often can be overwhelming and a nuisance. However, the relationship becomes awe-inspiring when navigated by a talented performer. Operatic soprano Renée Fleming is one of those talented musicians. Her mastery of sound and space is evident in the following excerpt from *The Inner Voice*:

When I am touring, giving recitals, the performing context changes every night: the city, the hall, the audience, the piano...The acoustics in an empty hall vary greatly from those in a packed hall. Sometimes the acoustic is too live, which can cause me to sing in a strangely high-resonance position...The second that something doesn’t feel or sound right, I start down my mental checklist: Am I feeling okay? Is the air-conditioning too high? Is it blowing on my face and drying out my throat? Am I pushing, and if so, why? Is a muscle tightening somewhere?¹⁰

A second to-and-fro relationship exists between a musician and the musician’s instrument. An example of this relationship is seen when an instrument reacts to a musician’s efforts in unexpected ways. Some musicians dislike this lack of control and others exploit it. In fact, entire genres of music have sprung up out of this phenomenon. Rock pioneers in the 1960’s would deliberately place their guitar pick-ups too close to powerful amplifiers in order to induce violent feedback distortion. Feedback is fascinatingly capricious. One of the exciting aspects of working with feedback is that it forces a musician to play at the line between control of anticipated sounds and reaction to surprise sounds. Jimi Hendrix’s iconic performance of the *Star-Spangled Banner*, performed at Woodstock as an anti-war protest, erupted into ear-splitting feedback that evoked both the chaos of war and the agony of loss. No less does the classical concert artist occasionally push control to its limit, exploring the same boundary between expected and unexpected.

Musicians play with other musicians just as they play with the unpredictable output of their instruments. Playing in a group requires musicians to enter a subtle conversation of sound in which each player must listen and respond accordingly for the conversation to have integrity. Perhaps this is why Duke Ellington once revealed, “The most important thing I look for in a musician is whether he knows how to listen.”¹¹

Musicians must also react to the physical, intellectual, and emotional beings that they are in any given circumstance. As an organic creature dependent on the constant fluctuations of nature, a musician’s idea of self entails varying moods and temperaments. There is a Zen saying: When it is hot, be a hot Buddha; when it is cold, be a cold Buddha. Just as Buddhists strive to live up to the ideal set by the Buddha, musicians strive to make their performances live up to an ideal potential. Musicians use their bodies to engage instruments, their intellects to generate ideas, and their emotions to fuel affect, all of which find expression in performance.

The last example of to-and-fro movement in play is the relationship between musician and pulse. Since the developments of the metronome and the click-track, a new concept of pulse has emerged as a large unit of time divided into equal parts. An older concept of pulse still occurs in performance and differs from the more recent, mechanically inspired model in that some segments of time are larger than others. Essentially, pulses ebb and flow—constituting a play relationship by which each fresh pulse is generated by the one that came directly before it.¹² Unless a performance abides by a click-track or a metronome, its pulse is governed by a playful relationship.

The Ease of Play

To-and-fro motion leads to the next defining feature of play, something Gadamer calls *the ease of play*. Back-and-forth motion allows for the active element to become renewed by relaxation at regular intervals. Think of the two chambers of the heart. One ventricle contracts while the other relaxes and then they switch.¹³ This design not only serves to pump blood throughout the body, it also prolongs the life of the heart muscles by avoiding strain due to overwork. Gadamer describes this playful relaxation in the following:

The ease of play—which naturally does not mean that there is any real absence of effort but refers phenomenologically only to the absence of strain—is experienced subjectively as relaxation. The structure of play absorbs the player into itself, and thus frees him from the burden of taking the initiative, which constitutes the actual strain of existence.¹⁴

Relaxation translates into a variety of experiences for a musician. Physical relaxation occurs during breaks between exertions. For example, cellist Pablo Casals once stated, “I relax my hand after striking every note.”¹⁵ Mental and emotional relaxations occur too. This type of relaxation manifests in a certain confidence that the performance is going well. Some musicians refer to this sense as being in the flow of a performance. Even though many elements of the performance are beyond the musician’s control, the musician feels confident in her ability to respond to unknown elements with poise.

This confidence is also related to an increased awareness of the present moment. When musicians claim to be in the moment, they report experiencing a slowing down, or even a stoppage of time. In reality, the focus on the to-and-fro of play has expanded the present moment in the musician’s consciousness by creating continuity between past, present, and future. The present is born of its past and simultaneously leads to its future.

The endless choices to be made in a performance drive a broadened awareness of this continuity of moments.

Different types of choices, characterized as voluntary and involuntary choices, impact a performance. Few phenomena are both, but in the body, breathing can be both.¹⁶ We breathe involuntarily when we sleep, and we breathe voluntarily when we sing. For musicians, the voluntary choice is the one that initiates a performance. It is essentially a commitment to seeing the performance through, no matter the obstacles. This then clears the way for involuntary choices. In the to-and-fro, involuntary choices can be so intuitive that they seem more like compulsions. Musicians act, relax, and then act in response to whatever happened in the relaxation interval. Cellist and philosopher Robert Martin describes the subtle nature of decision-making as it plays out in performance.

For example, a subtle adjustment of tone color in response to a change in harmony may constitute a musical decision, as I use the term, even if it is not performed consciously. That same adjustment might be a matter of conscious decisions for another; even the same player may have worked consciously, on earlier occasions, to make such tonal adjustments so that now the response is automatic... The mark of a musical decision is that it could be otherwise without constituting a clear-cut mistake.¹⁷

The Playful Task

Processes involving to-and-fro play cannot produce a fixed outcome, because whatever happens in the relaxation interval is beyond the performer's control and thereby redirects the course of events. Play is not conducive to the manifestation of exact intentions. It is more correct to say that play assigns the player a task. Gadamer defines the word task in this way:

Thus the child gives itself a task in playing with a ball, and such tasks are playful ones because the purpose of the game is not really solving the task, but ordering and shaping the movement of the game itself."¹⁸

In other words, an effective performance does not live up to every preplanned detail. In a

quality performance, musicians redirect the course of play via their response to elements originating from outside of themselves—thereby “ordering and shaping the movement of the game itself.”¹⁹ It could be this phenomenon to which Woody Guthrie referred when he said, “Take it easy, but take it.”²⁰

It turns out that the to-and-fro relationship inherent in play means that even soloists never play alone. Playful elements do not need to be sentient; as discussed above, other participants in the process often include the performance space, the instrument, and the pulse, to name a few. Gadamer provides this example: “Thus the cat at play chooses the ball of wool because it responds to play, and the ball games will be with us forever because the ball is freely mobile in every direction, appearing to do surprising things of its own accord.”²¹ Could it be that musicians have chosen their activity because they delight in this to-and-fro dynamic?

In this way, musicians are like high-wire acrobats. The dynamic balance between control and happenstance—or the dynamic balance between ideal intention and actual result—requires constant renegotiation. It is as important for a musician to develop a vision for a performance as it is for her to embrace spontaneity during it. This shared control does not free a musician from cultivating an expectation for a performance or from taking responsibility for artistic choices. It does mean that when musicians perform, they are not the true subjects of play. Though it is grammatically correct to say, “Alison Krauss played at the Hollywood Bowl,”—in which case she is the subject of the sentence— it is more correct to say, “Alison Krauss, the venue of the Hollywood Bowl, her amplified fiddle, and her band were engaged together in the phenomenon of play.” Musicians are just some of the many elements that are *being played*.²²

Part of the allure of a live performance is that vulnerability emerges within the to-and-fro movement. Hence another aspect of play is that “the attraction of the game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players.”²³ For a performance to be captivating, certain elements must be out of the musician’s control. Jeff Beck puts it this way: “Things turn out better by accident sometimes. But you can’t organize accidents.”²⁴ Renée Fleming puts it this way: “Part of why we watch these performers with such passionate intensity is the same reason we can’t tear our eyes away from the girl on the high wire or the man with his head in the lion’s mouth: the thrill that comes from witnessing someone taking chances.”²⁵

Playing Within the Boundaries

Musicians choose to play when they begin a piece. The results of that choice include responding to other elements until the performance ends and choosing to play within a structure of rules that govern a particular style of play. What are the rules that govern music performance? Each genre has a different rule structure—which, in Gadamer’s usage, is more like the term *stricture*.²⁶ These are essentially the cultural and physical freedoms and limitations that shape the style.

Structural elements of music manifest themselves as a combination of cultural traditions and the physical limitations of each instrument. Culture creates notational systems, pitches, scales, and performance traditions, to name a few. Other structures are determined by the fact that each instrument has its boundaries and capabilities due to its physical construction.

When musicians choose to play within a certain structure, a task emerges that must be taken seriously. However, we must also recognize that music is serious in a different way than brain surgery is serious.²⁷ If a brain surgeon's task does not proceed according to planned, she might kill the patient. It is highly unlikely that anyone will be harmed if the musician's performance takes an unexpected turn; the musician might even be able to respond to deviation in a way that heightens the artistic experience for all. Bruce Springsteen shed light on this contradiction of play when he said:

You've got to be able to hold a lot of contradictory ideas in your mind without going nuts. I feel like to do my job right, when I walk out onstage I've got to feel like it's the most important thing in the world. Also I've got to feel like, well, it's only rock and roll. Somehow you've got to believe both of those things.²⁸

The task may seem as serious as brain surgery to the player who has spent hours in preparation and whose career might seem to teeter on the success of a performance. This is exactly as it should be. In order for a performance to have an effect on listeners, the musician must be invested in the seriousness of fulfilling the task, even if that task is not serious in the world beyond the structure governing the performance. Gadamer claims, "Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play. Seriousness is not merely something that calls us away from play; rather, seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play."²⁹

So what is the purpose of engaging in tasks with sincerity? For the brain surgeon, the purpose of engaging her task with sincerity is obvious; she intends to heal her patient. The task of musicians does not require goal attainment. In the task of performing, musicians are able to create meaningful experiences for themselves and others. Gadamer asserts, "The meaning of these goals does not in fact depend on their being achieved.

Rather, in spending oneself on the task of the game, one is in fact playing oneself out.”³⁰

In playing, musicians expose a certain truth about life experience. Sincerity in performance involves playing oneself out of the obscurity of isolation and into the light of communication.

Play is a to-and-fro motion that renews itself through relaxation. That renewal frees the player from having to assert ultimate control over the performance. In fact, a more relaxed sense of control emerges once the player finds a dynamic balance between initiative and happenstance. From this balance, it becomes clear that the player takes on the task of reorganizing elements of play in accordance with its structure. While engaging in the task of performing, a shared meaning arises among all those present.

Meaning

The concept of play has brought us to another question—the question of meaning. Play arises in many facets of our lives. The poems cited above attest to the presence of play in nature. Human culture has created and maintained two pillars of play—the play of sport and the play of art. While many similarities exist between the two, this section concerns itself with the central difference between them: the core purpose of sport is competition whereas the core purpose of art is communication. Athletes compete in order to win. Even though sport generally has observers, it occurs whether or not there are onlookers. Observation, even just by the creator or performer, is the whole purpose of art, whereas competition is the purpose with sport and the observers are not essential to that purpose.

From start to finish, musical performance happens for three types of listeners: self, other, and the theoretical other. In the case of a recording, a performance is for a theoretical listener, meaning someone who was not present at the time of the recording but will hear the result eventually. Hence “artistic presentation, by its nature, exists for someone, even if there is no one there who merely listens or watches.”³¹

The presence of an observer brings about questions of meaning and interpretation. When a musician considers playing for an observer, this consideration, whether conscious or unconscious, expands a work into a wealth of ideas. Players search for meaning, find truths, and aim to present those findings to the listener. Music allows truth to run the gamut of life experiences. It could be as personal as the feeling of nostalgia depicted in the jazz standard *Autumn Leaves* or as political as the indictment of mankind’s greed in Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

Art produces experiential truth, not empirical truth. More precisely stated, the truth of performance is phenomenological. If a listener’s experiences resonate with the communications of another human being, her own experiences ceases to be random occurrences and become fundamentally human. Subjective thoughts become objects of systematic reflection and analysis. New truths arise when experience is understood from an awareness of human consciousness in general, rather than in the mind of self-alone. Truth emerges through phenomenology.

The communication of truth in performance has historically been hotly debated. Each era seems to advance new philosophies and revisit older philosophies about how meaning occurs in music. Some assert that meaning is a direct transfer from the composer, to the performer, to the listener. This implies that it is possible for the composer’s exact

meaning to be delivered intact to the audience via the performer. It is represented in the graphic below, where meaning travels along lines represented by arrows. Meaning originates with the composer, travels through the performer, and into the listener:

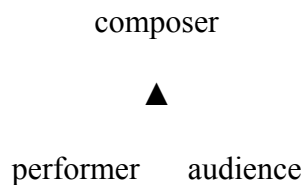
composer → performer → listener

Conversely, a more recent philosophy asserts that a transmission of meaning is impossible. This is due to an underlying belief that subjectivity is at the root of all symbolic communication. Therefore an exact meaning can never be shared. Meaning's inability to transfer from one person to another is represented by the circle with a line through it.

composer ∅ performer ∅ listener

The following concept of meaning is what I call a shared meaning. All participants in the performance recognize an essential meaning, collectively re-shape that meaning, and transform it beyond anyone's original intention. This space in-between the participants is "the true locus of hermeneutics."³² In the following graphic, meaning is symbolized by the triangle. The inside of the triangle represents the event of shared meaning. Each point of the triangle belongs to a participant that co-creates meaning. Each participant effects the other two, as represented by the lines that move away from one point and toward two others. All participants are actively involved in play even though they may be situated in different times and places. Furthermore, play exists in situations

where the composer is viewed as the initiator of the musical tradition and the performer and audience are viewed as interpreters of that tradition. Gadamer describes the phenomenon of understanding "as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter."³³ In the movement between tradition and interpretation, all participants expose their notions of the truth and during an effective musical experience, each participant's truth retains its essence while expanding.



In the first scenario, meaning moves in only one direction (from composer to audience). In the second, communication is incapable of transmitting meaning from one person to another. In the third, meaning is created and shared by composer, performer, and audience.

For meaning to occur in the manner of the third example above, transformations must take place. In performance, three significant transformations are worthy of discussion: when the performer ceases to be self, when the audience forgets self, and when the work separates from the *real* world and morphs into its own world.

Transformations

Beginning with how the performer ceases to be self, the performer reveals her true self via choices made in the to-and-fro movement of play. As established previously, it is

impossible to truly reveal oneself in the play of performance via the exact musical intentions created prior to it. It becomes more compelling to witness the moment-to-moment interactions of play than to decode what the performer originally intended. “Play itself is a transformation of such a kind that the identity of the player does not continue to exist for anybody. Everybody asks instead what is supposed to be represented, what is ‘meant.’ The players...no longer exist, only what they are playing.”³⁴

The player is aware of her true identity and original intention but conceals them from the audience. Only by disappearing from their real selves can performers invite listeners to take on the play of ideas as their own. When Bono from the band *U2* sings, “I can’t live with or without you,” the phenomenon of transformation allows listeners to think of a complicated relationship in their own lives instead of the one specifically referenced in Bono’s song. Gadamer states, “it becomes apparent that the play bears within itself a meaning to be understood and that can therefore be detached from the behavior of the player.”³⁵ Transformations also occur in purely instrumental music and in songs set in languages that are foreign to listeners.

The onus of transformation does not rest entirely on the performer; the audience must be willing to play as well. “Being present does not simply mean being there along with something else that is there at the same time. To be present means to participate.”³⁶ Audience participation includes aspiring to have a meaningful experience and being open to a temporary loss of identity. Listeners lose a portion of their self-conception when they connect with the musical ideas of the performer. This loss happens for as long as play sustains the listener’s focus. Loss of self is the catalyst for a meaningful experience

because it is the only way a listener can enjoy her life experience with that of another.

Gadamer explains:

Being outside oneself is the positive possibility of being wholly with something else. This kind of being present is a self-forgetfulness, and to be a spectator consists in giving oneself in self-forgetfulness to what one is watching. Here self-forgetfulness is anything but a privative condition, for it arises from devoting one's full attention to the matter at hand, and this is the spectator's own positive accomplishment.³⁷

In addition to the transformation of the performer and the audience, the work transforms too. It becomes a world in and of itself and becomes “What no longer exists is the world in which we live as our own.”³⁸ A musical performance has its own beginning and end, which is why Gadamer explains that, “play takes place in another closed world. It is, so to speak, its own measure and measures itself by nothing outside it.”³⁹ The end is what makes the world of the work so compelling. In real-life, humans rarely get to experience finality. Gadamer states, “Reality always stands in a horizon of desired or feared or, at any rate, still undecided future possibilities.”⁴⁰ Because of that, many circumstances in an individual's life lack clarity and the unknown future can cause stress, worry, and cynicism. In the world of art, humans are presented with the beginning, being, and ending of a symbolic life experience. “What unfolds before us is so much lifted out of the ongoing course of the ordinary world and so much enclosed in its own autonomous circle of meaning that no one is prompted to seek some other future or reality behind it.”⁴¹ In art, we are no longer bound up in a web of future possibilities. Instead, art creates a distance between our real-life conditions and ourselves, which frees us to see our lives anew. A truth exists in the closed world of art, “in it and through it everyone recognizes that that is how things are.”⁴²

The upheavals in real life have a tendency to ignite such intense reactions that we can feel removed from the person we were before the disturbances took place. When a life

is viewed from a distance, it is possible to become aware of the continuous being that weaves through life's highs and lows. The transformative power inherent in distancing is evident in the following excerpt from Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*. In it, the continuous self is referred to as *Me*, whereas the fractured self is referred to as *me*.

Trippers and askers surround me,
 People I meet, the effect upon me of my early
 Life, of the ward and city I live in, of the nation,
 The latest news, discoveries, inventions, societies,
 authors old and new,
 My dinner, dress, associates, looks, business,
 compliments, dues,
 The real or fancied indifference of some man or
 woman I love,
 The sickness of one my folks—or of myself,
 or ill-doing, or loss or lack of money,
 or depressions or exaltations...
 They come to me days and nights and go from me again,
 But they are not the Me myself.
 Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
 Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
 Looks down, is erect, bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,
 Looking with its sidecurved head curious what will come next,
 Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it.⁴³

It is indeed a universal type of truth that travels across this distance between me and Me. Artistic truth is in the vein of John Lennon's famous lyric, "Life is what happens while we're busy making other plans." Art seduces us away from those "other plans" that obscure our core sense of aliveness and invites us to become intimate with every passing moment. As portrayed in Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*, "Time passes. Listen. Time passes. Come closer now."⁴⁴

Recognition

Regardless of one's beliefs concerning an afterlife, we can all agree that an embodied human experience is finite. Whether one views the summation of a life as epic, tragic, or comic, revisiting a life's ultimate meaning is worthwhile. "A spectator's ecstatic

self-forgetfulness corresponds to his continuity with himself. Precisely that in which one loses oneself as a spectator, demands that one grasp the continuity of meaning. For it is the truth of our own world that is presented before us and in which we recognize ourselves.”⁴⁵

Performers also have the opportunity to recognize their experiences in their work. The same recognition described between listener and performer happens between performer and composer. As previously mentioned, music is often performed for an audience of the self. When musicians play etudes, they engage in a play between composer and themselves. J. S. Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* was intended to be a communication between player and composer. Inherent in this tradition is the opportunity for recognition of a truth across time and place. “But we do not understand what recognition is in its profoundest nature if we only regard it as knowing something again that we know already—i.e., what is familiar is recognized again. The joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing *more* than is already familiar.”⁴⁶

A profound interdependence resides at the heart of music-making. A musical work has a life that moves beyond the time and place of its inception. The work cannot be reanimated without the assistance of the performer who is positioned squarely in the present, but musicians are more than the here and now. Musicians’ motivation to play works of the past is due to a conscious desire, or perhaps an instinct, to move beyond their positionality.

Regarding the symbiosis between composer and performer, there is something oddly wonderful about the fact that I am better acquainted with the inner life of J. S. Bach than I am with my own next-door neighbor. There is also something wonderfully odd about the fact that J. S. Bach needs my aliveness to bring life to his music. In cases where

the performer is the composer, each performance of a work has the potential to reveal a new meaning.

Correct and Unique Interpretations

What does the paradigm of shared meaning imply about a work of art? There is an inherent truth in the work of art that can only be revealed through performance. Since performance involves play, the truth will be crafted in a different way every time. To honor both phenomena, the work is subject to both a correct and unique interpretation. This is another of the great contradictions of performance.

The correct view stems from the fact that a truth lies within both a structure and a tradition that influence a performer's choices. The unique view stems from the fact that truth must be channeled through a living, breathing, mortal person. As Gadamer says, "This is a recreation not of the creative act but of the created work, which has to be brought to representation in accord with the meaning the interpreter finds in it."⁴⁷ The meaning inherent in a work is more than its time and place, yet it is subject to the interpretations of a particular time and place in order to survive. Cellist and philosopher Robert Martin describes this contradiction eloquently when he describes the process of preparing a Beethoven quartet for performance:

[Performers] try hard...to make decisions with fresh ears and open minds; there is a natural striving for something that will distinguish their performance. But at the same time, the performance traditions surrounding the Beethoven quartets have an undeniable hold on most players. Their love of these works came in most cases from hearing certain recordings as children; their teachers are often the very artists who played those recorded performances. Further, the young players are acutely aware that audiences know the works not from scores but from recordings.⁴⁸

A work will be different from one performance to the next. Shared meaning asserts that a work needs all participants to bring its truth into being—the composer plants a truth,

the performer cultivates it, and the real or theoretical listener should be nourished by it. Each party sifts truth through her life experiences and subtle shifts in meaning transpire. Meaning also becomes nuanced by the caprices of play. Thus the work's "own original essence is always to be something different (even when celebrated in exactly the same way). An entity that exists only by always being something different is temporal in a more radical sense than everything that belongs to history. It has its being only in becoming and return."⁴⁹ For that reason, a work is not just a token of a past culture and time. With each return, it expands to embrace aspects of the time and place in which the performance occurs. Since it can expand, it is not limited, and since it emerges from an inherent truth, it is centered.

The performance potential of a work can increase with time. "Every such presentation is an ontological event and occupies the same ontological level as what it represents. By being presented it experiences, as it were, an *increase in being*...essential to an emanation is that what emanates is an overflow. What it flows from does not thereby become less."⁵⁰ This idea of emanation as overflow implies that, in a quality work, the revelations of its truth can never be exhausted. This is why listeners never tire of hearing new interpretations of old works. Debussy's *Clair de Lune* has been performed countless times since its premiere, yet audiences still line up for tickets to hear it performed by someone new.

For performers, the concept of shared meaning involves both freedom and responsibility. It asserts that, in a successful performance, a truth emerges which is both unique and accurate. The tradition through which the performance takes place grows

richer because there is more to draw upon for the next presentation. Performers reshape their own tradition every time they play for an audience.

After a thorough examination of play, I realize that Professor Norman's statement "don't say practice, say play" was attempting to expand my notions of music-making. Since I valued the goal-oriented and controlled experience of practice above the to-and-fro dynamic and spontaneity of play at the time he asserted the idea, he must have polarized practice and play as a false dichotomy to inspire new ideas. I have come to view play as an expansion of self and practice as a narrowing of self. Both are necessary to move meaningful music between composer, performer, and audience. Imagine the jellyfish that opens its translucent body, filling it with water. When it contracts, the displaced water propels the creature upward.

From the linguistic presentation of the command, "don't practice, play," it would seem that a polarity exists between practice and play. In reality, practice takes place within the realm of play. Play is the vast, limitless field in which musicians operate. When musicians are at play, they are aware of this vastness. When musicians practice, they focus on specific points within the vastness of play. Musicians do not ultimately face a problem of polarity, but a task of integrating. The experienced musician knows when to expand into play and when to narrow into practice. We, like the jellyfish, proceed as musicians by expanding and narrowing. Or one may consider the musician's ultimate task via a poetic metaphor by Robert Frost, in which I view practice as *vocation* and play as *avocation*.

My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.⁵¹

Why Investigate Play?

but for their voices
the herons would disappear —
this morning's snow⁵²

Chiyo

Great music challenges a player to approach music as an athlete, a scientist, a shaman, a politician, a historian, a psychologist, an actor, and an environmentalist, among other things. The current multidisciplinary curriculum—complete with theory, ear training, music history, performance practice, and private instruction—illuminates many of these roles and provides tools by which to explore them. Ideally, institutions prepare musicians to become adept at integrating diverse performance issues into correct interpretations. This does occur, often to great success. Yet, while I was in graduate school, I noticed that the multidisciplinary curriculum overwhelmed many music students.

It became disheartening to watch the robust discipline and devotion of my capable peers dissipate into confusion and loss of voice. At times, it appeared that the diverse curriculum was pulling the musician away from herself in sundry directions. I too became sporadically discouraged, yet my love of play consistently revitalized me. Play inspired me to draw the myriad concepts gleaned in graduate school back into myself—to sift, sort, and integrate them according to my life experience.

Therefore, instead of becoming defeated by the often irreconcilable claims of each subject, musicians can choose to celebrate the infinite combinations of performance related concerns—some of which take shape within them. Musicians benefit from a tandem focus on a correct interpretation as well as a unique interpretation. The concept of

play necessitates both a correct and unique interpretation and thereby validates the musician's vital role in meaningful music-making. Amidst the stresses and rigors of a music education, musicians need to be reminded of their special role in the tradition of music-making, and it turns out that a musician's special knowledge involves play.

Could it be that musicians are more often encouraged to contract into correct interpretations than they are encouraged to expand into unique interpretations? If so, it comes as no surprise that musicians often feel stuck. Recalling the jellyfish metaphor, the musician who stays contracted for too long becomes stagnant. Musicians need to contract and expand in order to progress.

Other scholars have voiced similar concerns. English scholar John Rink champions the musician in a recent article entitled *The State of Play in Performance Studies*.

If I had one criticism to make of performance studies to date, therefore, it would be that certain authors have all but robbed performers of their musical personae and artistic prerogatives, transforming them into museum curators, laboratory subjects, theorists and analysts, at the expense of their identities as musicians. What conviction can performers hope to have when thus constrained? And if such constraint is the end result, can we claim that performance studies has much to do with actual performance? If this would-be discipline is to exist in more than the 'fragmentary' state alleged by Dunsby, its practitioners must somehow attend to the performer's concerns... That does not at all mean forsaking the research pursuits of the last decades, but it may require a re-evaluation of motive, a refocusing of activity and an abandonment of any claim that we have touched upon the reality of performance unless or until we have done so. It may also necessitate a wider scholarly awareness of the spectrum of performance-related research being conducted—not least because performance is itself highly variegated and resistant to explication in one and only one vein. We can be sanguine about the future of performance studies perhaps only to the extent that performers themselves come to assume greater priority within the discipline.⁵³

Applications of Play?

You play. You always have and you always will. Play happens whether we recognize it or not—whether we fight it or not. The expanded awareness of a musician at play allows her to notice what is already there. Bruce Lee's character in *Enter the Dragon* encourages his student to play by saying, "Don't think; feel! It is like a finger pointing away to the moon. Don't concentrate on the finger or you will miss all that heavenly

glory.” Here, Bruce Lee’s character presents his student with a false dichotomy. The distinction is not between thinking and feeling, but instead, the teacher attempts to demonstrate the limitations of a purely goal-oriented and controlled approach.

I have witnessed many performers sulk in defeat because they were unable to express their original intention during a performance. Meanwhile, many in the audience have successfully had meaningful experiences while witnessing the play between the performer’s original intention and the unforeseen elements that altered it. Clinging to the original intention is like concentrating on the finger pointing away to the moon.

Play is at the root of musical invention. When Hendrix thought to use feedback as bombs exploding and men wailing, his mind must have been expansive enough to draw connections between certain frenzied frequencies and human experiences.

Play experiments with boundaries and allows us to gain control in the broadest sense. Zen master Shunryu Suzuki explained to his students, “to give your sheep or cow a large, spacious meadow is the way to control him.”⁵⁴ Non-goal oriented, non-specified play serendipitously finds solutions to problems. Overstepping boundaries is necessary to know where they are. For example, we will not know how fast to take a piece unless we play with its tempo.

Norwegian scholar Øivind Varkøy's recently published article presents alternatives to what he attests is a problematic trend in pedagogical thinking. These alternatives invoke the value of play and provide a vision for its incorporation into contemporary pedagogy. Varkøy describes the problem as “looking on knowledge in general and school subjects in particular primarily as tools or means for reaching another goal or end.”⁵⁵ The alternative is the concept of *Bildung* which, “in its widest sense, ...is seen as movement. People break

away from daily life, plunge into the unknown, and then later on take new experiences. *Bildung* is about venturing away from oneself into the unknown, stretching one's own limits in order to properly find one's true self.⁵⁶ This movement is referred to as a journey.

One suggested application of *Bildung* in the field of music education involves encouraging students to make journeys. “The concept of *Bildung* is in many ways characterized by the fact that it exists in a tension between influence or formation on the one hand, and uninhibited growth on the other.”⁵⁷ If educators cultivate this tension, then space can be made for both the contraction and expansion of their students and for both correct and unique interpretations.

I conclude with Varkøy's interpretation of one of Richard Stanley Peters' pedagogical philosophies. It eloquently describes the task of the educator who aspires to illuminate the value of play through facilitated journeys:

It appears that Peters envisaged an optimal teaching situation where there is little difference between teacher and pupil. They both experience taking part in mutual challenges and exploring a mutual world...The significant teachers are those who can lead such an exploration in accordance with strict, foundational principles, and at the same time infect the pupils with a united enthusiasm for the communal task.⁵⁸

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¹Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself* (Boston: Shambhala, 1998), 2.

²Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (Boston: Shambhala, 1992), 227-228.

- ³Brain Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
- ⁴Hans George Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 111.
- ⁵Gadamer, *Truth*, 104.
- ⁶Gadamer's emphasis in bold-face.
- ⁷Gadamer, *Truth*, 105.
- ⁸S.M. Scott, ed., *Yin Yang: A Zen Guided Journal* (White Plains: Peter Pauper Press, 1998).
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- ¹¹Nat Hentoff, *Miles Davis: The Columbia Years 1955-85* (CBS Records Inc. 1988): liner notes.
- ¹²Concept inspired by Peter Yates during a 2009 lesson with the author.
- ¹³Credit to Peter Yates during a lesson with the author.
- ¹⁴Gadamer, *Truth*, 105.
- ¹⁵Peter Yates, *Creating a Method* (Los Angeles: by the author, 1999), 19.
- ¹⁶Amy Weintraub, *Yoga for Depression*. (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), 124-129.
- ¹⁷Robert Martin and Robert Winter, eds., *The Beethoven Quartet Companion*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, Ltd., 1994), 123.
- ¹⁸Gadamer, *Truth*, 107.
- ¹⁹Ibid.
- ²⁰Philip Toshio Sudo, *Zen Guitar*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 81.
- ²¹Gadamer, *Truth*, 106.
- ²²Gadamer's term and emphasis.
- ²³Gadamer, *Truth*, 106.
- ²⁴Sudo, *Zen*, 90.
- ²⁵Fleming, *Inner Voice*, 181.
- ²⁶Credit to Peter Yates for suggesting the word *stricture* in place of *structure*.
- ²⁷Credit to Michael Dean during a lesson with the author.
- ²⁸Sudo, *Zen*, 157.
- ²⁹Gadamer, 103.
- ³⁰Ibid., 108.
- ³¹Ibid., 110.
- ³²Ibid., 295.
- ³³Ibid., 293.
- ³⁴Ibid., 111.
- ³⁵Ibid., 110.
- ³⁶Ibid., 121.
- ³⁷Ibid., 122.
- ³⁸Ibid., 111.
- ³⁹Ibid.
- ⁴⁰Ibid., 112.
- ⁴¹Ibid., 124.
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- ⁴³Whitman, *Song*, 5-6.
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- ⁴⁶Ibid., 113.
- ⁴⁷Ibid., 118.
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- ⁵⁰Ibid., 135.
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⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid., 94.

⁵⁸Ibid.